

Gospel Doctrine

Lesson: 2 Corinthians

Reading: 2 Corinthians

[PDF version of the lesson notes.](#)

I. Introduction

Today, we turn to Paul's second letter to the Corinthian saints. However, it is really not the second letter because it appears that Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthian church even before 1 Corinthians (see 1 Cor 5:9). Also it is not clear that 2nd Corinthians is only one letter; it may be a composite of multiple letters by Paul to the Corinthian saints. Margaret MacDonald, in the *Oxford Bible Commentary*, explains:[1]

It is a generally held view today [by scholars] that 2 Corinthians is made up of more than one of Paul's letters. Although, there is no MS [manuscript] evidence to support this theory, there are several problems in the text as we have it which raise the question of its unity. Among the more serious difficulties is the sharp break between the conciliatory tone of chs. 1-9 and the harsh, sarcastic tone of chs. 10-13.

Authorship: Paul is the author of this letter (or composite of multiple letters); it is considered authentic by most scholars. "In form and style 2 Corinthians closely resembles Paul's other works, and its authenticity has not been questioned. However, the language and content of 2 Cor 6:4-7:1 have struck many as difficult to reconcile with Paul's other writings and, therefore, this passage has often been viewed as an interpolation." [2]

Date Written: 55-57 CE.[3]

The Recipients: The recipients of the letter are the saints at the city of Corinth (a city in Greece). Corinth had a vital Jewish community by the early 1st century CE.[4] Corinth sometimes is referred to or depicted as "Sin City" but scholar, Jerome Murphy O'Conner, points out that this assertion, "has been shown to be totally devoid of foundation ... Corinth was no worse than any other Mediterranean port." [5]

II. Comfort

Read 2 Cor 1:1-7:

1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia: 2 Grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; 4 Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we

may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. 5 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. 6 And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. 7 And our hope of you is stedfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation.

- Paul mentions the word "comfort" a lot in the opening of this letter. How does he use the word? What precisely does it mean in the context of these verses? Would "console" be a better or worse word?
- NT Wright explains the following about the underlying Greek:[6]

Actually, the word he uses is a bit more many-sided than 'comfort'. It can mean 'to call someone to come near', 'to make a strong appeal or exhortation', or 'to treat in an inviting or friendly way'. The whole idea of the word is that one person is being with another, speaking words which change their mood and situation, giving them courage, new hope, new direction, new insights, which will alter the way they face the next moment, the next day, the rest of their life.

How does the preceding affect your understanding of these verses and the use of the word comfort?

- Paul, in verse 4 mentions the following about God: "Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." What is he talking about here? How does God's "comfort" allow Paul (or us) to comfort those that are in trouble?
- Some commentators suggest that Paul believed in a pattern of "interchange." Specifically, "what is true of the Messiah becomes true of his people." [7] Do you agree? Do these verses support this idea? If yes, in what specific way is that illustrated in these verses?
- Is it fair to say that the theme of the whole epistle is comfort which comes from the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus to those that enter in a new life in him?

III. Delivered From Death

Read 2 Cor 1:8-14:

8 For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: 9 But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: 10 Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet

deliver us; 11 Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf.

12 For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward. 13 For we write none other things unto you, than what ye read or acknowledge; and I trust ye shall acknowledge even to the end; 14 As also ye have acknowledged us in part, that we are your rejoicing, even as ye also are ours in the day of the Lord Jesus.

- What do you think of verses 8-9? What does it mean that Paul and his companions had the received a death sentence? Do you think this is hyperbole? Did Paul and his companions really want to die? Can we tell from the context?
- Is it important that Paul never tells us the specific nature of his suffering?
- Is it fair to say that Paul learned something new from this recent "suffering?"
- It seems likely that some/many in his audience would naturally link suffering with God's displeasure or judgment. If that is the case, why would Paul even mention his suffering?
- Paul, once again, refers to the resurrection (verse 9). How does the resurrection fit into Paul's argument? Why is it important in this context?
- What is verse 11 about? It seems that the gift was bestowed because of the prayers of many, but What is the gift? And why were prayers of many important?
- Consider the NRSV of verse 12-14:

12 Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God--and all the more toward you. 13 For we write you nothing other than what you can read and also understand; I hope you will understand until the end-- 14 as you have already understood us in part-- that on the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast even as you are our boast.

What is 14 about? What does it mean that "we are your boast even as you are our boast?"

IV. Promises of God

Read 2 Cor 1:15-22:

15 And in this confidence I was minded to come unto you before, that ye might have a second benefit; 16 And to pass by you into Macedonia, and to come again

out of Macedonia unto you, and of you to be brought on my way toward Judaea.

17 When I therefore was thus minded, did I use lightness? or the things that I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, that with me there should be yea yea, and nay nay? 18 But as God is true, our word toward you was not yea and nay. 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us, even by me and Silvanus and Timotheus, was not yea and nay, but in him was yea. 20 For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us. 21 Now he which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God; 22 Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts.

What is Paul's argument in these verses? What is his main point? Is a modern translation (NRSV) helpful for these verses?

15 Since I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a double favor; 16 I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on to Judea.

17 Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say "Yes, yes" and "No, no" at the same time? 18 As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been "Yes and No." 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes." 20 For in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes." For this reason it is through him that we say the "Amen," to the glory of God. 21 But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, 22 by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.

- Were the people in Corinth upset that Paul's plans had changed his original plans?
- How does Paul use his "change in plans" to make a theological point? What is that point?
- What does it mean in this context that "every one of God's promises is a 'Yes'?"
- What does it mean that Christ "has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment?" Is it important remember the Christ refers to the "Anointed One?" How can the gift of his Spirit be the first installment?

V. Many Tears

Read 2 Cor 1:23-2:4:

23 Moreover I call God for a record upon my soul, that to spare you I came not as yet unto Corinth. 24 Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand.

1 But I determined this with myself, that I would not come again to you in heaviness. 2 For if I make you sorry, who is he then that maketh me glad, but the same which is made sorry by me? 3 And I wrote this same unto you, lest, when I came, I should have sorrow from them of whom I ought to rejoice; having confidence in you all, that my joy is the joy of you all. 4 For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you with many tears; not that ye should be grieved, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly unto you.

- How do these verses change or enhance your understanding of Paul and his relationship with the congregations in Corinth?
- Paul claims that he didn't come back as planned because he wanted to spare them. What does that mean in this context? Is it related to the idea that he is a helper of their joy (verse 24)? Is it related to the idea that he didn't want to make them sad?
- Is it clear in these verses why Paul's planned visit would have made the people sad? Do these verses hint that at least some people at Corinth didn't want to him to visit? That they were opposed to him?
- Is Paul saying that a rejection by the people in Corinth at some point was so painful to him that he couldn't visit as original planned? That his pain and frustration would have led to a visit where he didn't exercise his authority appropriately so instead he wrote them a letter (previously) of overflowing tears?

VI. Forgive

Read 2 Cor 2:5-11

5 But if any have caused grief, he hath not grieved me, but in part: that I may not overcharge you all. 6 Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. 7 So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. 8 Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him.

9 For to this end also did I write, that I might know the proof of you, whether ye be obedient in all things. 10 To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ; 11 Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.

- What is Paul saying in verses 5-6? NT Wright translates the passage as follows:[8]

5 But if anyone has caused sadness, it isn't me that they have saddened, but in measure (I don't want to emphasize this too much), all of you. 6 The punishment that the majority has imposed is quite enough.

What can we infer about what has happened in the past here?

- In verse 10 Paul says the following?[9]

If you forgive anyone anything, so do I; and whatever I have forgiven -- if indeed I have forgiven anyone anything! -- it's all happened under the eyes of the Messiah, and for your own sake.

What is Paul saying here? Is he really saying that he can't remember ever forgiving anyone?

- What do these verses teach us about forgiveness? What role is Paul suggesting for the Messiah here?

VII. The Messiah's Fragrance

Read 2 Cor 2:12-17:

12 Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened unto me of the Lord, 13 I had no rest in my spirit, because I found not Titus my brother: but taking my leave of them, I went from thence into Macedonia.

14 Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. 15 For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: 16 To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? 17 For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.

- What is Paul talking about here? What are these verses about?
- Okay, I must admit I have trouble following the King James Version in these verses. Thus, let's read the NRSV for this pericope:

(14) But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. (15) For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; (16) to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? (17) For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.

- What metaphor is Paul invoking in verse 14? What does this triumphal procession refer

to?

- The first image that comes to my mind is a procession after a military victory. Victor Paul Furnish, in the *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, provides some historical background to this procession metaphor:[10]

Paul's readers would have recognized an allusion to the Roman "triumphs," elaborate processions sponsored by the emperor to celebrate particularly important military victories. Since the ones "on display" were prisoners of war paraded in chains through the streets, it must be with them and not their triumphant captors that one is to identify the apostles."

What do you think of this possibility? Does the metaphor refer to prisoners of war in a procession? Does that make sense in this context? How does it change your understanding of these verses?

- What is the aroma or fragrance metaphor about? Who is the "aroma of Christ?" What does this metaphor make you think of?
- What does the fragrance refer to? The Gospel? The apostles? How does it affect people, particularly in verse 16? What qualities does the fragrance or aroma have?
- Margaret MacDonald, in the *Oxford Bible Commentary*, suggests the following:[6]

'Fragrance' refers to the odour of incense in sacrifice. Paul may be thinking of rituals associated with Roman celebrations of triumph or with Jewish temple practice ... In the accounts of martyrdom in later church literature, beautiful fragrance was a sign of God's presence and that God was on the side of the Christians.

What do you think of this possibility? How does it affect your understanding of these verses?

- How does verse 17 fit in with procession and fragrance metaphors?

VIII. Tablets of Human Hearts

Read 2 Cor 3:1-6:

(1) Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you? (2) Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: (3) Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart. (4) And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: (5) Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our

sufficiency is of God; (6) Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

- Paul makes a reference to letters of recommendation in these verses. These letters were, "conventional introductions for itinerant missionaries to the writer's friends and wider circles." They were clearly used by early Christians missionaries and letters written for Apollos are mentioned in Acts 18:27-28:

(27) And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace: (28) For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ.

Why do you think Paul brings up these letters? Does it make sense that the Corinthian audience would want letters of recommendation? Can you think a modern analogue to these letters in the church today?

- Why does Paul believe that he doesn't need letters of recommendation? Do you think this justification still applies today? Are there limits to using a justification like Paul does here in these verses? Why? Under what circumstances? Is it important the Paul is the founder of this congregation?
- What does this argument reveal about the nature of early Christian congregations, structure of the church, and missionary work?
- Verses 5-6 are often used to motivate a distinction between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law? How is Paul using this distinction within the context of the preceding argument about letters of recommendations?

IX. Moses

Read 2 Cor 3:7-11:

(7) But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: (8) How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious? (9) For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory. (10) For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth. (11) For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious.

- What themes are continued or extended in these verses? Does the scope of the letter of law vs spirit of law argument widen in these verses?

- How do these verses help us understand the letter of the law and spirit of the law comparison in verse 6? Is the spirit of the law, the "new covenant", and the letter of the law, the "old covenant?"
- Why is the giving of "the law" called a "ministry of death?" In what ways is that phrase apt?
- What is wrong with the law according to Paul? Is it inherently bad? Do verse 10 and 11 help us understand Paul's argument about the problems with the law?

X. Ministries of the New Covenant

Read 2 Cor 3:12-18:

(12) Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: (13) And not as Moses, which put a vail over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: (14) But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. (15) But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. (16) Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away. (17) Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. (18) But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

- How does Paul use Moses to explain the differences between the old covenant and the new covenant? Why does he describe Christ taking away the veil? What does Paul mean by the veil? How does it correspond with idea or implications of Grace?
- In what sense does Paul mean that the Spirit of the Lord is liberty or freedom (particularly given the context)? Does it have specific reference to the Mosaic law?
- What does Paul emphasize about the role of the Spirit of the Lord? How is it different from the law? What does it mean to have the veil taken away in this context?
- Is verse 18 the climax of these verses? What does the taking away of the veil actually allow us to see?

XI. Jesus Christ as Lord

Read 2 Cor 4:1-6:

(1) Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; (2) But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. (3)

But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: (4) In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. (5) For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. (6) For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

- How would you describe the imagery in these verses (hid, blind, light, lost, shine, etc)? What do they remind the reader of? What is Paul trying to emphasize through the use of these images?
- Do you think Paul is responding to particular concerns in these verses? What is he trying to assure the congregation of?
- Does the reference to hidden things continue the "veil" theme from chapter 3? What does it refer to in this situation?
- What is Paul talking about in verses 5-6? Why does Paul tell the people he is Jesus' slave (servant in the KJV)? What is he trying to remind the people of? Does it tie into parts of chapter 3?

Endnotes

1. *Oxford Bible Commentary*, 1135.
2. *Oxford Bible Commentary*, 1135.
3. Brown, Raymond, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 542.
4. Brown, Raymond, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 542.
5. *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, 790.
6. Wright, Nicholas Tom, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians*, 3-4.
7. Wright, Nicholas Tom, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians*, 4.
8. Wright, Nicholas Tom, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians*, 18.
9. Wright, Nicholas Tom, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians*, 18.
10. *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, 1096.
11. *Oxford Bible Commentary*, 1136.